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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN DEFENDS HIZBALLAH RELATIONSHIP,
INSISTS ON CABINET EXPANSION

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In a November 2 meeting with the Ambassador, FPM leader Michel Aoun denied that his party had any dealings with Syria and asserted that Hizballah is increasingly independent of Damascus. Despite March 14 group warnings of violent confrontation, the FPM has no plans either with or without Hizballah to carry out acts of violence, Aoun said. The FPM will participate in the Berri-sponsored national consultations planned to begin next week, but neither those talks nor a proposed joint committee process can take the place of expanding the cabinet. Aoun defended his relationship with Hizballah and implied that this relationship had spared Beirut violence during the July-August war. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief called on Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader General Michel Aoun November 12. Aoun son-in-law and advisor Gebran Bassil also participated in the meeting. FPM official Najji Hayek appeared briefly at the beginning of the meeting but left within a few minutes.

WARNINGS

¶3. (S) The Ambassador began by noting the intense USG attention to Lebanon and Lebanon's potential to reap benefits from the relationship. He continued, however, with a warning to General Aoun that the FPM's continuing relationship with Hizballah and Aoun's public statements criticizing the Embassy and USG policy are alienating those in the United States who would like to have a more constructive relationship with the FPM. In particular, rumored dealings with Syria on the part of some FPM officials have resulted in great concern and suspicion. Some are saying that Aoun has sold his reputation to Hizballah, he added, and they do not understand Aoun's motivations at present. Americans have a hard time accepting the threats and ultimatums coming out of Hizballah; being unhappy with an electoral outcome should not mean taking to the streets. The USG does not understand why Aoun would stand with Hizballah in this strategy.

¶4. (S) Aoun countered that he had no advisors who go to Syria

and that such charges were simple "misinformation." No one in his party is authorized to go to Damascus and there is no engagement between the FPM and Syria, he insisted. There may have been some dealings with Syria without his knowledge, he admitted. However he is careful to avoid close relationships with either Syria or Iran. He recounted what he said when an Iranian parliamentary delegation of three MPs visited his Rabieh home; he could have "friendly" relations with them but could not form a political axis with Iran. He related that Abbas Hashem, a Shia MP aligned with the FPM, and FPM MP Ibrahim Kenaan were present and that Hashem (who is particularly close to Hizballah) was disappointed with the General's refusal to come to a more formal arrangement with the Iranians.

15. (C) Aoun recalled that he visited Washington in 2005, where he told his interlocutors that Lebanon was at an impasse. It remains at an impasse today, because the March 14 coalition refuses to share power and hasn't accomplished anything. Aoun imagined a solution, which for him meant coming to an understanding with Hizballah. Aoun said that it was he who first demanded the national unity government, now described as a Hizballah demand, over a year ago, before his written compact with Hizballah. Expanding or adjusting the cabinet would also call for a new Ministerial Declaration, Aoun said.

(Note: This is a subtle variation from the Hizballah position, which is that the Ministerial Declaration can remain the same. Perhaps hoping to seduce his guests, Aoun may have been providing a hint that language in support of the "resistance" might be lifted. End note.)

VIOLENCE

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16. (C) Regarding Walid Jumblatt's statement the day before that any violence would be met with violence, Aoun pointed out that the only parties mentioning violence are the March 14 coalition. Jumblatt is talking about blood and anticipating violence, he charged, but the FPM is not planning any. However, despite Jumblatt's bravado, it would not be in the government's interest to resort to violence.

17. (C) Furthermore, he added, Hizballah has been the victim of violence on many occasions, at the hands of the (Sunni-dominated) Internal Security Forces and others, and no one has responded. The Ambassador advised Aoun that he should be careful to avoid the appearance that he stands with a revolutionary, radical cleric seeking to topple a government leadership that enjoys wide international support.

The statements by March 14 leaders are in direct response to the threats of street demonstrations coming from Hizballah and Aoun. Aoun said that there was no plan or understanding between the FPM and Hizballah on next steps should March 14 stick to its refusal to expand the cabinet.

DIALOGUE

18. (C) Aoun confirmed that he would participate in Speaker Berri's proposed national consultations, saying there is no alternative. He would concentrate on adjusting or changing the government. The Ambassador asked whether there might be some issues on which the FPM and the governing coalition could focus on within joint committees, to make political progress and reduce tension. He suggested electoral law reform and preparation for the Paris III donors conference. Aoun responded that the FPM could participate in the Paris III preparations as long as the other side wished to discuss it "objectively." Bassil complained that what is discussed in committees is not implemented. When the Ambassador suggested that the committees could have executive power to work on implementing issues agreed upon in the earlier National Dialogue sessions, such as disarmament of the Palestinians, Aoun said that the place for such discussion is

within the government; "put us in government and we will participate."

¶9. (S) Aoun said, regarding the possibility of participating on a committee on electoral law reform, that once the reform is completed the next step would be to proceed to early parliamentary elections. The Ambassador suggested changing the president first. Aoun countered, "We can't let this parliament elect a president." Aoun tried to make a deal with Saad Hariri over the presidency, he asserted, but Hariri refused because he "wants all the power." The Ambassador asked whether there might be a compromise candidate for president, someone whom both the FPM and March 14 could accept. A new president, after all, would lead constitutionally to the need for a new cabinet. Aoun did not answer this directly but continued to insist that the current Chamber of Deputies is the result of a failed electoral law.

¶10. (C) The Ambassador noted that different parties, including the Patriarch, have different opinions regarding which type of electoral system is appropriate. However, it is dangerous to establish a precedent of simply overthrowing the government whenever one doesn't like the results of an election. He expressed his concern that others could use the precedent to overthrow a government of which they do not approve. He also warned that the new electoral law could be harder to achieve than Aoun believes and could take longer.

RELATIONSHIP WITH HIZBALLAH

¶11. (S) Aoun told us that he lacked all confidence in the current leadership, in particular in Jumblatt and Hariri. The Ambassador countered that, while Siniora had earned the confidence of the world, Aoun appeared, paradoxically, to have tremendous confidence in Nasrallah. Whether or not Jumblatt and Hariri have faults as leaders, Nasrallah can lead Lebanon into destructive war. He has a militia and, if his own words are to be believed, 30,000 rockets aimed at Lebanon's powerful neighbor Israel.

¶12. (S) Aoun complained that he had the situation with

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Hizballah "handed to me" from decisions made when he was in exile. After his return, he tried to get March 14 group support to deal with Hizballah but they responded by making a bid to monopolize power in Lebanon; they reneged on their electoral deal with Hizballah and paralyzed the Constitutional Council.

¶13. (S) Hizballah will never be a Syrian puppet, Aoun averred. Hizballah will have good relations with Damascus but it is becoming more and more independent. The FPM can work with Hizballah as long as it keeps Hizballah's trust and focuses on the final goal. (Note: It is unclear which of many possible goals Aoun meant. End note.) "I'm not in love with them," but "if you isolate them they will respond aggressively. The country can't afford clashes." The way the security forces deal with Hizballah is counterproductive.

¶14. (S) The Ambassador noted that Hizballah already has a major influence within the GOL and that it already has more power than any other single party. Why does it need more? Aoun replied that Hizballah believes the GOL sided with Israel during the July-August war. Now, there is a need for a broker between Hizballah and the GOL, and the FPM can fulfill that role. When the Ambassador pointed out that Aoun appeared to trust Hizballah blindly while hating March 14 leaders, Aoun responded that he had reasons for maintaining a good-faith relationship with Nasrallah. During the war, for example, "I prevented many things here in Beirut." In addition, Hizballah has arms and the coalition parties have less power to threaten. Hizballah will be disarmed, he predicted, but it will be part of a wider solution.

¶15. (S) When the Ambassador asserted that "Hizballah is using you" Aoun responded that Hariri had done worse -- Hariri tried to destroy him in Lebanon, in the rest of the Arab countries, and in the United States. Hariri was lobbying against Aoun's hoped-for Saudi visit, and had hired a lobbying firm to smear Aoun in Washington.

MEDIA ATTACKS

¶16. (SBU) Upon the conclusion of the meeting, Aoun handed the Ambassador an FPM press release in response to the October 31 POTUS statement of support for PM Siniora. In the release, sharply critical of the U.S. (and faxed to Department NEA/ELA November 2 and which is posted in English on the FPM website), Aoun denies that the FPM is seeking a return of Syrian influence in Lebanon. The statement holds that, "the desire of the Lebanese to replace a government which has brought nothing but instability, corruption and debt upon the Lebanese people" is "at the heart of America's values." The release then appends a lengthy quote from the Declaration of Independence justifying the overthrow of despotism.

¶17. (SBU) The November 3 as-Safir newspaper carried the front-page headline "Feltman Threatens Aoun's Future" and an article claiming, among other things, that an FPM official had described the meeting between the Ambassador and Aoun as characterized by political attacks and accusations of aiding Hizballah to destroy Lebanon. The article also claimed that the Ambassador had attacked Speaker Berri during the meeting with Aoun. When called by the Embassy, Bassil denied that any FPM official had talked to as-Safir and claimed that he had called the paper himself to complain. Bassil said that the FPM would post a disclaimer on its website denying that any FPM official had made such comments and denying that the article was an accurate reflection of the meeting's content.

COMMENT

¶18. (C) General Aoun's rabid hatred of the March 14 leaders derives not from any love for Syria or Iran but rather from his sense of exclusion from the pro-independence club he believes he deserves to lead. But, whatever its motivation, his hatred must warm hearts in Haret al-Hraik, Damascus, and Tehran. This was probably our toughest, most candid meeting yet with him, but our message does not seem to be having an impact in getting him to think twice about his unseemly relationship with Hizballah. Our hunch is that Aoun knows that we (like March 14 leaders) are not going to deliver the

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one prize he seeks: the presidency. Hizballah, Syria, and Iran, on the other hand, just might. If Aoun can maintain Shia support with half the Christians and a scattering of other pro-Syrian Lebanese, he is easily the most popular presidential candidate. But, as we have noted before, Lebanon's presidency is decided by a parliamentary, not popular, vote. Ergo, Aoun's insistence on changing the parliament before presidential elections. Short of a massive defection of March 14 MPs to Aoun's camp, he has no chance in the current parliament to ascend to Baabda Palace.

FELTMAN